



Seated Male "Coquero" Figure

Date

ca. 300-1 B.C.

Medium

Ceramic

Description

Coca-chewing ("coquero") male figure seated on stool; Ceramic, hollow; light brown with burnished red slip, blackened resist designs on sash and loincloth. Capulí, Northern Highlands (Ecuador) This is a Capulí "coquero" (coca-chewing) figure. The male figure is seated on a stool, the symbol of chiefly power and prestige, and has the cheek bulge characteristic of those with a coca quid in their mouth, from chewing coca leaves. ____ The Spanish

word coquero (coca-chewer) refers to the widespread practice of chewing coca leaves; coca-chewing was widely practiced in the past and continues to be an important part of traditional lifestyles in the Andes today. A pinch of an alkaline substance such as powdered lime is added to the coca leaves to strengthen the stimulant effect, and the chewed quid is kept in the mouth until the effect ceases. The stool is a standard piece of equipment for tropical forest shamans even today, providing stability as a shaman takes narcotics to commune with the spirit world. Stools in the pre-European Americas were status symbols used by chiefs. In small societies such as in modern Amazonian tribes, the shaman often served as the chief as well. Hallucinogenic drugs were commonly used by religious specialists (shamans) to commune with the supernatural world. Visions of the supernatural beings seen in such spirit journeys played an important role in the cosmology or spiritual life of these peoples; the fantastic creatures, part-human, part-beast, depicted on some ceramic figurines and vessels are a physical record of such iconography. Shamanic healing practices were often mediated by hallucinogenic drugs, as found today among many contemporary lowland Amazonian cultures. Botanical sources of such drugs are common in Latin America, and include the San Pedro cactus (*Trichocereus pachanoi*), coca (*Erythroxylum* spp.), nightshade (*Datura* spp.), tobacco (*Nicotiana* spp.), leguminous trees (*Adenanthera* spp. and *Mimosa* spp.), a member of the nutmeg family (*Virola* spp.), *Banisteriopsis* spp., *Psychotria* spp., and holly (*Ilex* spp.). Evidence for the use of these and other species comes from their depiction in works of art, such as paintings of San Pedro cactus on Nasca bowls, and Capulí "coquero" figures with their characteristic cheek bulge from chewing quids of coca leaves, as well as from finding the remains of these plants in archaeological sites. Drugs were ingested in a variety of ways, including snuffing or snorting by nose, chewing (leaving a quid of leaves in the mouth), eating, drinking as a tea or infusion, smoking, or by anal infusion (enema). Drug-related paraphernalia included snuffing tubes, specialized vessels to hold drugs or drug accessories (such as lime-pots used for

chewing coca), pipes, and clyster tubes used to administer enemas. **Figurine Function** The original function of archaeological figurines found in museum collections is uncertain. When objects are excavated by archaeologists, then information about the associations between artifacts and the circumstances of their burial are carefully recorded, and we can draw many conclusions about object function. Very few of the archaeological objects found in museums today were excavated in a careful, scientific manner, so we have fewer clues about their past associations and function. A wide range of people and objects are shown in pre-Columbian pottery vessels. From burials, we know that the variety of head shapes, jewelry, and clothing styles reflect the actual appearance of these prehistoric people. Variations in human head shapes may be produced as the result of intentional cranial deformation; head shapes were an obvious (and permanent) way to mark one's group affiliation. In a time and place where television and newspapers were unknown, highly decorated pottery was used as one vehicle of information exchange, simultaneously conveying what was socially acceptable by documenting different aspects of real life (models OF society), and what people were expected to do (models FOR behaviors, actions, or appearance). Because figurines represent many life stages and ordinary human activities, they probably served to exemplify the usual norms of behavior, to serve as guidelines or rules to help socialize people and integrate them into society. Although obviously decorative, figurines could also have been used to make offerings to supernatural powers, to serve as good luck charms, or to accompany the dead as grave goods. **Capulí (300 BC-AD 500)** The Capulí culture occupied a mountainous region, ranging up to 3,000 meters (10,000 feet) in elevation, located in the valleys of the rivers Chota and Carchi, between what is now northern Ecuador (Carchi Province) and southern Colombia. The people practiced maize-based agriculture, with some supplemental hunting and gathering. The political organization of this group consisted of multiple chiefdoms with small territories, with achieved rank differences and a specialist artisan class. Two types of Capulí burials are known; a deep (up to 40 meters or 130 feet) shaft tomb type, and a shallower burial tomb type under mounds or "tolas." The Capulí engaged in trading coca leaves, and are famous for their small ceramic figures of men chewing coca, with prominent cheek bulges, known as "coqueros" in Spanish. Capulí ceramics are typically black-on-red, decorated in the style known as negative painting, continuing an artistic tradition which appeared for the first time during Chorrera. Common ceramic vessel forms include squash or gourd-shaped bottles, annular ring-based bowls called "compoteras," lenticular plates, and globular jars. Ceramic shell-shaped ocarinas and shell necklaces are evidence of trade or contact with the seacoast, while tropical monkeys and other remains testify to trade relations with Amazonia as well. Remains of both the Piartal and Tuza cultures are found in this region in addition to those of the Capulí, but the relationship and chronology of these three distinct traditions remains controversial. Almeida Reyes (2000) claims that Capulí should be dated between 800 AD and 1500 AD, and that it represents a distinct cultural tradition which coexisted with and persisted through time in the same region as both Piartal (earlier) and Tuza (later). A similar figure (#33) is pictured on pages 42 and 71 of Silva Nigrinis et al. (1994): *Arte de la Tierra Colombia, Poder, Colección Tesoros Precolombinos, Fondo de Promoción de la Cultura: Santafé de Bogotá*. Other comparable figures are pictured on page 272 of Bruhns (1994): *Ancient South America*. Cambridge University Press, and on p. 226 of *Arte Precolombino de Ecuador* (1977). It is similar to 2006.070.138. The figure has the black resist-painted decoration characteristic of Capulí pottery.

Dimensions

7 1/4 x 2 3/4 inches (18.4 x 7 cm)